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Edge on Employment: Choose a career before choosing an academic path

by KIRKLAND J. MURRY, FOR CAPITAL GAZETTE SEPT. 7, 2012

I was recently quoted in a Capital Gazette newspaper comparing college degrees and certifications and wanted to elaborate on my position. My specific quote was “college degrees are going to be overrated.”

In our work with Anne Arundel County businesses, evidence has shown that holding an occupation-specific credential often proves more successful in obtaining employment today than having a four-year degree.

Bachelor’s degrees have value, as they teach critical thinking and objective reasoning, and many technical degrees are a necessary prerequisite for their respective industry. However, short-term training or two-year degrees leading to credentials can be just as valuable in securing sustainable employment in high-demand industries.

In many cases, particularly in the Information Technology (IT) field, industry-recognized certifications are increasingly required beyond four-year degrees. With the rapid technological advances, one must keep up to date.

A computer science degree from 10 years ago means very little today without certifications showing an understanding of modern technology, such as Security + or Cisco Certified Network Associate. It is certifications like these, in combination with education and experience, that are assisting unemployed individuals in successfully re-entering the work force.

Highly specialized training

In today’s job market where skills have become highly specialized, training — whether short term or bachelor’s degree — must also be specialized. Top employable degree categories include health care, computer science and engineering, according to a survey by Challenger, Gray and Christmas. All require highly technical training.

Even in these industries, a graduate must often obtain a certification to enter the work force. Many individuals choose college degrees based on their academic interests, often not giving strong consideration for their occupational goals.

Yet, liberal arts degrees that provide a general foundation of knowledge are progressively harder to market when looking for employment. Certifications such as Computer-Assisted Drafting or Certified Information Systems Security Professional are highly sought by today’s businesses and offer more marketable skill sets.

Network systems and data communications analysts, medical assistants, dental assistants, network and computer systems administrators, computer software engineers, applications and radiologic technologists and technicians are expected to see job growth over 50 percent in Anne Arundel County by 2018. For each of these occupations, businesses either prefer or require industry-recognized certifications of potential candidates.

Value of certifications

Employers seek specific occupational skills. Advanced manufacturing is a growing industry in Anne Arundel County that highlights this trend.

Maryland manufacturers are having a difficult time hiring trained workers. Short-term or two-year training in digital fabrication or CNC Machinery can fill these high-demand positions at more than 25 major manufacturers in the Baltimore area. The shortage of skilled workers in our area, and nationwide, has changed the focus to training that can fill business needs now.

Businesses continually reach out to community colleges and training providers to design training to meet their specialized needs, and serve on advisory boards to ensure that training meets the changing educational requirements of the industry. The resulting short-term certification or two-year degree is closely in touch with what businesses need today and in the near future.

The TIME Institute, a consortium of community colleges in Maryland, recognized the lack of targeted training for advanced manufacturing skill sets and developed short-term training to meet that need. This serves as a regional model for filling the skills gap in our area's high-demand industries.

The bottom line

While a four-year degree education can be invaluable and is often a minimum qualification, it is ultimately the certifications that employers are looking for that make the difference in securing employment. In today's competitive job climate, it is beneficial to choose a career before choosing an academic path. This ensures you get the most out of your financial investment, complete the appropriate training that leads to marketable skills, and land in a sustainable, recession-proof career.

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<http://www.capitalgazette.com/news/business/edge-on-employment-choose-a-career-before-choosing-an-academic/article_b826448c-4b7a-5cc2-855f-39250088bb09.html>.

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